THE PERFECT GIFT
December 18, 2005

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 95:1–7
Luke 2:1–7

"Beloved, let us love one another,
because love is from God."
1 John 4:7

It begins with an emperor's folly, for in setting out to register "all the world"
Augustus put something into motion that transcends all earthly power.
We know the story and how it turns out, but let's try to put ourselves in the shepherd's place, afraid to open ourselves to God and in need of reassurance,
being told not to fear. Let's be willing, like Mary, to take the words in, to treasure and ponder them, because so much is possible when we do.
As these words wash over us they penetrate despite our distractions and defenses.
Their spirit can change us whether we will it or not. If we feel utterly exhausted,
drained of all feeling and weary with worldly chores and concerns,
so much the better. . . . Our emptiness means there is room for God after all.

Kathleen Norris
Zealous Hopes: A Christmas Meditation

Dear God, in the mist of all the hurried preparing that lies ahead,
in the midst of the busyness, the last cards to be signed,
gifts to be purchased, wrapped and sent,
in the midst of all the expectations we set for ourselves this week of Christmas,
give us a quiet moment or two, so we can hear the singing of angels.
Startle us again, O God, with news of love's birth in Bethlehem. Amen

I suspect I'm not the only one here who spends a fair amount of time in December on the critical issue of the perfect gift. I've always admired the

last-minute people who don't begin until Christmas Eve and somehow get it done.

We are blessed here in this neighborhood to have lots of help. The goods are right in front of us. Store counters are full; windows elegantly display a variety of suggestions. And the catalogs keep coming. Online shopping is now so easy and efficient that many, I am told, do all their Christmas shopping sitting at home at their desks and don't have to risk stepping into the sea of humanity coursing down the sidewalks of Michigan Avenue on a December Saturday—truly hazardous duty.

In my own pursuit of the perfect gift—which I found, by the way, but for obvious reasons cannot describe—I found myself reading a *Time* magazine supplement with the engaging title "The Luxury Index." The advertisements were elegant, exquisite: Cartier, Hermes, Dior. I learned in the introduction that "luxury is no longer about being the biggest. It's about being intimate and unique." Michael Burke, CEO of Fendi's Flagship, at its 5th Avenue opening, surveyed the two-story store full with handmade furs and trendy bags and said, "In the past few years we've seen bling-bling luxury evolve into more personal luxury. Now there's small scale luxury." Examples of small scale luxury: a personalized special edition white cell phone with precious stones in the case, a canvas Ralph Lauren Ricky Bag, and, my favorite, a Dyson DC 15 Animal Vacuum for your cat or dog.

Greatly comforted, I headed out for the uniquely personal, intimate, and small scale gift. And I pondered, as I suppose many of us do at this time of year, the original gift that prompted this astonishing phenomenon of Christmas, a gift personal, intimate, and small, the gift of love in the person of a child, the newborn baby of Bethlehem.

Bob Edgar, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches and a former member of the House of Representatives, was part of a group of American religious leaders who, last Christmas, visited Baghdad. They went to mosques, hospitals, schools, and churches. There are Christian churches in Iraq. At ten o'clock in the evening, the delegation attended the candlelight service at the Presbyterian Church of Baghdad. There were 400 people present, among them a child, Caroline. She was about four years old. Bob describes how she was "all dressed in red with a red hat, and on her backside were the words, 'Let it Snow.' She flirted with all of us from the religious delegation, bringing to us a cracker or a pretzel. Just as it got to our face she would take it away and pop it in her mouth." Bob and the others had seen some difficult things in Iraq: violence, enormous suffering, the wounded in hospitals, destroyed homes, businesses, makeshift morgues. He writes, "That little Caroline is the picture I have of true love in a little child not knowing what was going to happen in the next few weeks as she

faced war, turbulence and pain" (Chicago Sunday Evening Club, *News*, Nov./Dec. 2005).

It is what the Christmas story is about. It is what Christmas is about: love coming into the world, the real world where people live and die and wars are fought and life is lived joyfully and sometimes tragically, love coming into the world in a humble stable behind a crowded inn, the picture of love in a little child, the perfect gift.

The theologians teach us that the uniquely Christian idea is that the essence of God is love. It's there in a remarkable little letter an elderly man wrote twenty centuries ago to a beleaguered, persecuted church in Asia Minor, not far from Iraq actually, the First Epistle of John.

> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. . . . God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

God is love? Where did that come from? That's not how people understood God. God is power. God is the intimidating, awesome force humans experienced in volcano, storm, and earthquake. God is mystery. God is the unimaginable, incomprehensible Other who lives in the heavens. God is justice. God sits on a throne, judging—dispensing rewards for good behavior, punishment for evil. Those are the ways people have thought about God down through history: power, mystery, judgment.

The Greeks, whose thinking dominated the world at the time of the birth of Jesus, taught that God is perfect. By that they meant that God has no needs, no hopes, no aspirations, certainly no feelings. God is complete in Godself. God doesn't need anything. God's perfection, the Greeks taught, was an isolated, unchanging, unfeeling essence. The Greek word for it is *apatheia,* from which we get the word *apathy.* If God had feelings—became angry or happy, hated or loved—God would be as needy and weak and vulnerable as any human being—a ridiculous thought.

God is love, love with all the messiness, the heartbreak and vulnerability that go along with love. That's a new thought. That's a powerful thought. That's a thought that changes everything.

Douglas John Hall, distinguished Canadian theologian who teaches at McGill University, says that God is not unfeeling, uncaring; in fact, the Christian assertion is that it's the opposite. God cares deeply, loves so passionately it hurts. Hall writes, "God is God only in relationship. God is, means God loves" (*Imagining God*, p. 119).

And American Presbyterian theologian Howard Rice puts it elegantly and simply: “The heart of our experience of God is an inner knowing that ‘I am loved,’ loved beyond my comprehension, beyond my earning or deserving” (*Reformed Spirituality,* pp. 164–166)

As I read the newspapers last week, with the President of Iran questioning whether the Holocaust happened and suggesting that Israel, a Jewish state in the midst of Muslim countries, be removed from the map, as Israel assassinated Palestinians and Palestinians attacked Jews, as Christians were hunted down and killed in Sudan, and as Sunni and Shiite Muslims contended with one another in Iraq, I couldn’t think of a more important or more relevant idea than “God is love,” that the salvation of this world, its preservation in some way that remotely provides for peace and security and health and enough to eat, depends not on who has the biggest armies and the most weapons, but on love.

In the meantime, the newspapers remind us daily that some evangelical Christians are on the warpath combating what they think is a crusade against Christmas. We’ve had enough, Franklin Graham said on CNN. We’re fighting back. We’re taking Christmas back. The American Family Association is boycotting Target for saying “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” Wal-Mart has been targeted by the Catholic League, and right-wing TV personality Bill O’Reilly claims that Christmas, and Christianity in general, are under siege. Even President and Mrs. Bush are being criticized for the 2005 White House Christmas card, a picture of the snow covered White House lawn with their pets frolicking; inside a quote that includes a verse from Psalm 28:7 and “With best wishes for a holiday season of hope and happiness.”

I appreciated a *Tribune* editorial by Leonard Pitts in which he observes that “what we’re seeing here is an ever more pluralistic society struggling to balance the faith of the majority with the rights of and feelings of the minority. . . . . Why is pluralism so hard for these people?”

For what it’s worth, I think Pitts is correct. If you want to celebrate a Christian Christmas, go to church, not Lord and Taylor. From me to you it’s Merry Christmas, Blessed Christmas, Christ-Filled Christmas. To Rabbi Sternfield, it’s Happy Holidays. Our holiday greetings are not, I would submit, an opportunity to witness to our personal faith or bludgeon our Jewish neighbors. We do Jesus no honor by making our neighbors uncomfortable in his name. Holiday greetings are an opportunity to respect, honor, and love our neighbors.

Beloved, let us love one another.

That's the bottom line. God is love. Those who abide in love, abide in God. It is a powerful idea, not only about God but about our own humanness. Because God is love, the highest and best of our humanity appears when we love one another, when we care for and respect and honor and help one another.

Beloved, let us love one another. Sister Joan Chittister says that "it is the simplest of Christianity—that we reach out to others. . . . To give love, a person needs to have known love." And then she makes the most interesting suggestion: "The people who love us do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. . . . They show us the face of our creating, caring God on earth. . . . Perhaps the deepest spiritual understanding we can muster is that human love is the only proof we have of the love of God."

We are put here to love, Joan Chittister says, not for the sake of the other alone, but for our sakes as well.

To be able to love, to have love planted in your heart, to have love that may have been long dormant in your heart unearthed and called out of you, is to be alive. It is to be the person you were created to be. "God is love. Those who love abide in God and God abides in them."

Psychiatrist Gerald May agrees: "Love," he says is the most important thing in life. Love is the one thing necessary: we are here on earth for the sole purpose of deepening and furthering love, for God and for one another" (The Sunday Evening Club, *News*, Nov./Dec. 2005).

And the late Langdon Gilkey, one of the great Christian thinkers of our generation, University of Chicago professor: "To be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us" (*Message and Existence*).

The perfect gift is a gift of love that awakens love in you, a gift of love that draws out of you, perhaps against your will or better judgment, perhaps challenges your normal cautious reserve, your instinct for self-protection and self-preservation that warns you to be careful, to not care too much, to not become vulnerable—the perfect gift, a gift so loving that it enables you to love.

That is what Christmas is: God coming, not in expected power and mystery and judgment, but in love—humble, weak, vulnerable love. God coming, in of all things, the birth of a child. God's love changing us, calling love out of us, refashioning us into the men and women God wants us to be, which is to say people who know that we are here to love others.

God is love. That love, we believe, is the fundamental reality. That love is at the heart of the universe.

Love, Gerald Mays says, is “the one thing necessary. Love is where we come from and where we are meant to be heading.” This perfect gift, this vulnerable, powerful love, is for us, now— to receive and to answer with our own love. But it is also beyond now. It is forever. It is the love from which nothing will ever separate us.

Tom Long, who teaches at Emory, tells about visiting a dear friend who was very sick and declining at Christmastime.

> It was a cold Saturday morning; the neighborhood was brightly decorated with lights and Frosty the Snowman, and Rudolph and Jolly Santa Clauses.”

The hospice people ushered Tom into the room. He sat down beside his friend and remembers,

> There was not much to say. This would be his last Christmas and we both knew it. We sat mostly silent, a word passing between us now and then.
>
> Suddenly there was movement downstairs, the sounds of muffled voices, the shuffle of feet. It was a choir from his church come to sing Christmas carols. We could hear them whispering among themselves, trying to decide what to sing. Indeed, what do you sing to a dying man? Their voices started, softly at first, “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming.” My friend and I looked at each other and waited as the choir slowly climbed the stairs, their voices growing nearer and stronger “to show God’s love aright.” The choir was now standing in the doorway. My friend, deep into the darkness of dying and still agonizing hours away from the dawn, turned away so they would not see his tears as he listened to them as they sang: “She bore for us a savior, when half spent was the night.”

That choir knew that it would be dishonest to sing something cheery and upbeat: “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” “They knew they needed to sing truthfully and hopefully, to lament as well as rejoice and so they sang of God’s love coming ‘When half spent was the night’” (*Testimony: Talking the Faith*, pp. 33–34).

> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. . . . God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

The perfect gift.

Amen.